DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 450 008 SO 031 605

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TITLE	Community-School Relations. Current Policies of Parental Involvement and Community Participation. Cases in Brazil and Chile.
PUB DATE	1999-04-00
NOTE	8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Comparative and International Education Society (43rd, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, April 14-18, 1999).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Evaluative (142) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Comparative Education; Developing Nations; *Educational Change; *Educational Policy; Educational Research; Foreign Countries; *Parent Participation; Public Schools; *School Community Relationship
IDENTIFIERS	*Brazil; *Chile; Latin America

ABSTRACT

Current educational policy in Latin America has been aiming to include community participation in a wider spectrum as part of decentralization reform. Much of the rhetoric of these policies seems to originate from neo-liberal policies of State modernization carried out under the auspices of international organizations. Based on a critical review of the literature relating to educational reform and participation in Chile and Brazil, this study examines current policies on school participation by parents and community members with reference to cases in both countries. Findings suggest that participation in school governance has been more a conquest of teachers than of parents, and community participation, in its broadest sense, remains an appealing maxim. (Contains 17 references.) (BT)

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Annual Conference of the Comparative and International Education Society
OISE/UT, Toronto, Canada, April 14-18, 1999.

ED 450 008

Community-school relations. Current policies of parental involvement and community participation. Cases in Brazil and Chile

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THE CASE OF THE SCHOOL COUNCILS OF CAMPINA GRANDE, BRAZIL

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Parental and community participation are part of current education decentralization and public school restructuring policy in Brazil. Basically, participation of all the internal and external actors comprising the school community (teachers, principals, technical and support staff, students, and representatives of parents and other community members) has been a condition and a requirement of democratization of school governance and construction of school autonomy, a process simbolized by the election of principals and the creation of School Councils. Moreover, parental and community participation is expected to contribute to the betterment of the quality of educational services. Some data from documentary and empirical research in process (Barbalho, 1999; Queiroz, 1999) illustrates the challenges and difficulties of the decentralization and parental participation framework in the case of the implementation of School Councils in the municipal school system of Campina Grande (350,000 inhabitants), the second biggest city in the state of Paraiba.

The background of educational decentralization policies

Educational decentralization policies in Brazil appeared during the military dictatorship (1964-1984) as part of the educational modernization project of social and economic development. The education reforms then included the complete reestructuring of all levels of the educational system, the municipalization of the primary or fundamental level of schooling (1st to 8th grade), and the creation of Parent-Teacher Associations (Law 5.692/1971). In the 70s, for instance, the Northeast was the main stage of a series of socioeconomic development programs (financed by BID, BIRD and the World Bank) which established precarious (mainly rural) municipal school systems, as parallel structures dependent on state and federal government budget transfers, while waiting for fiscal reform.

The redemocratization process in the 80s implied moving from authoritarian and centralized planning (policymaking) towards the democratization of social intervention and participatory planning. In public schools the impetus for social participation was channeled into the elections of principals by the school community (teachers, technical and support staff, students and parents' representatives), basically a conquest of the newly organized teachers' unions. Parental participation, however, did not exist, as Parent-Teacher Associations remained formal.

Calls for decentralization, greater school autonomy and participation of social actors, and better financial and pedagogical performance have permeated National Education Plans during the 80s and 90s. The 1980/1985 III PSECD proposed technical and administrative modernization and participatory planning in order to include claims from grassroots levels. The 1986/1989 PNDNR called for decentralization of public accountability and citizen participation in the formulation and implementation of education policies. According to the new Constitution, promulgated in 1988 (Article 206 established the democratic management of public schools), the 1991/1995 PSA stressed the democratic management of education, meaning decentralization of decision making processes, participation in the definition, implementation, control and

evaluation of educational policies (especially regarding the use of publics funds), and greater school autonomy to reframe pedagogical practices. The 1993/2003 PDET, based on the World Declaration on Education for All, proposed the decentralization of basic education programs and projects; democratic management and evaluation of schools and school systems, with social participation and representation through Councils with decision-making powers; and the financial, administrative and pedagogical empowerment of schools, as units apt to define and implement their political-pedagogical projects. Accordingly, the 1995/1998 Ministry of Education PPE called for increasing decentralization in order to attain school autonomy, efficiency and equity, hence reinforcing its role as coordinator, regulator, and promoter of services, while limiting its action to supplementation.

The decentralization rationale

Decentralization, coupled with fiscal reform, has been envisioned as a strategy to solve the State crisis. Broadly, the context of educational decentralization policies involves neo-liberal reforms and global (foreign) models, the critique of the complexity, concentration, bureaucratization, high costs, low productivity and quality of education systems and outcomes, and post-modern conceptual changes in the meanings and practices of education.

As a political-administrative model, decentralization is conceived as re-distribution of originally centralized competencies, resources and accountability amongst the State and its branches, and the society and its social organizations and actors. This implies re-distribution of power and re-division of work amongst different autonomous sectors of the system (Costa, 1997). Along this line, participatory administration postulates the elimination of centralized authoritarianism; the diminishing of work divisions that reinforce differences, distances and hierarchies amongst social groups; the effective participation of different social groups in decision making and the empowerment of actors/citizens (Hora, 1994).

Instrumentally, educational decentralization policies aim at greater participation and democracy, at the political level; more resources, at the economic level; better quality, at the technical-pedagogical level; and more efficiency of the educational processes, at the administrative level (Casassus, 1995). Outcome-based public administration requires competitiveness (among schools and within schools) and the participation of the client/citizen in the evaluation of the results, thus introducing the logic of markets in the public education system (Oliveira & Castro, 1993, in Peroni, 1997). Insofar as decentralization is aligned with democratization and participatory management processes, it requires the creation of mechanisms in order to enable the exercise of school autonomy, community participation and individual preparation for participation and collective decision-making.

Therefore, processes of restructuring, innovation, enhancement of autonomy, of participation and performance demand specific collective organization and learning, and the empowerment of actors. According to Hora (1994), participation will not occur spontaneously; in school, specifically, it must be incited, experienced and learned by all those who belong to the school community: teachers, technical staff, students, parents, and the general community.

Current reform framework and strategies

The reform framework for the 1990s emphasizes quality, understood as productivity, more efficiency and efficacy through quality control, decentralization of accountability, outsourcing, and school autonomy. Evaluation through national testing, new National Curricular Parameters, and new school financing mechanisms represent the main pillars of current reform, especially after 1995 (Peroni, 1997).

Adequate financing for school autonomy has been provided, after the fiscal reform process launched by the 1988 Constitution, by means of a fund for maintenance and development of fundamental education (1st to 8th grade), and teacher pay increment (Law 9.424/1996), thus addressing urgent problems such as schools' indigence and teachers' low salaries. Ingeniously, the condition for money transfer to the school is the existence of the School Council, with parental and community representation.

Though not uniform country-wide, the new school administration model is described in the 1994/2003 State Plan of Basic Education of Rio Grande do Norte in the following terms: decentralization of power and resources, increase of school autonomy, modernization of planning and strengthening of management. Its objectives are twofold: to implement a planning process capable of mobilizing the social forces in order to demand quality education; to ensure school autonomy capable of reflecting community demands and aspirations. Its goals include guaranteeing school administrative, financial and pedagogical autonomy and the creation of School Councils for the collective management of schools. As strategies, the Plan proposes: promotion of community participation in the management of the educational system; attracting additional resources from state, federal and international donors; search of partnerships with local groups, unions, churches and NGOs.

The School Councils are precisely defined as "Administrative School Councils" (Decree 12.508/1995/RN), charged with management of the School Budget and approval of the School's Political-Pedagogical Project. They must include the following segments' representatives: parents, students, teachers, principals, technical staff and support staff, one of each per shift. (Brazilian schools usually have three shifts: morning, afternoon and evening). In Campina Grande students' representatives must be older than ten (Queiroz, 1999). Curiously, community members other than parents are not explicitly included in the Council's composition, which implies that parents have been equated to community. On the other hand, service providers (school staff) predominate over users (parents), what limits even more the meaning of community participation.

It is expected that the School Councils will provide space for the construction of a school that is more responsive to the community's interests, bridging the gap between technical and popular knowledge, promoting the exercise of citizenry, the learning of democratic social relations and the education of active citizens. Through the School Councils the community will be able to propose actions, manage and control the quality of schooling, as well as define and follow-up the education that is provided by the State. Because School Councils have decision making, rather than merely advisory, prerogative, they provide access channels through which parents can intervene in schools, participating effectively in school policymaking, at least at building level (Queiroz, 1999).

The initial experience of School Councils in Campina Grande, Paraiba

Municipal School Councils had to be created immediately in the beginning of 1997, so that schools could be formally entitled to receive money transfers and set their budgets for the first time.

In Campina Grande the very process of creation of the Councils was participatory: the Municipal Secretary of Education (SEDEC) called a committee with representatives of SEDEC, principals, teachers and school technical staff (curriculum supervisors, counselors, social workers), and the main local union (SINTAB) in order to discuss, elaborate and approve a single statute for the School Councils of the Municipality. The statute was discussed in all schools and then approved in a general assembly.

The implementation of the councils, however, was not an easy task. In one school (Grupo Escolar Luiz Cambeba), education professionals were not willing to participate. In the afternoon shift a draft was required in order to select a teacher representative. Getting parents' representatives was even more difficult: they presented excuses such as illiteracy, lack of time to participate, and lack of knowledge about what to do as a Council member (Queiroz, 1999).

The first meeting for the setting up of the Council and election of its members in this one school (Grupo Escolar Luiz Cambeba) happened on June 20, 1997. The President, Vice-President, Secretary and Treasurer positions were occupied by school representatives. In the fourth ordinary meeting of the first year (held on November 12, 1997), two members were expelled due to three consecutive absences: a student and a parent. In the first meeting of 1998 (held on April 1, 1998), the President, Vice-President, a parent/mother representative, and a female student representative all resigned amid controversy and the allegation that the Council was manipulated and lacked autonomy. The following meeting (held on April 15, 1998) was also polemical and counted with the presence of the Secretary of Education who attempted to clarify the attributions of the principal and of the Council. In the third meeting of the second year (held on May 15, 1998) new office holders for the Presidency and Vice Presidency, and new parent and student representatives were elected. In the fourth meeting (held on July 30, 1998) a meeting for choosing a new parent representative was called. Only in 1998 the Council counted with two parent representatives, but half of the total 11 meetings in that year counted with the presence of just one parent, and there was one meeting with no parent representative at all.

According to the Secretary of Education, of the 167 Municipal Schools of Campina Grande, 73 set up Councils up to 1998. The goal for 1999 is to universalize the presence of Councils in the Municipal School System. However, of the 73 schools that have set up Councils, only 9 are implementing democratic management practices. In the majority of schools, the Principal continues to be the sole authority and the Councils have no autonomy. Moreover, the majority of schools does not succeed in solving their internal problems and keep turning to SEDEC for assistance.

A final comment on the Brazilian case

The ideas of citizenship education through social participation, and democratic management of public schools have expressed the hopes of progressive sectors and

actors in Brazil, who might in part adhere to decentralization policies while rejecting their economic, privatizing, and outcome-based trend. Yet, such hopes might turn into disillusionment in face of the difficulties to promote active parental and community participation in school governance, since parental and community organized movements are not frequently found. For one thing, the recent creation of School Councils was a result of central/federal policy, and the required social actors were not available or prepared to take up their expected roles (Queiroz, 1999; Fonteles Sobrinho, 1997).

Anyhow, this new paradigm of democratic school management is only tacit and promising. The practices apt to materialize it depend on concrete conditions of social participation (free time, for instance) and on the (positive) meanings and values that the actors might construct through their experiences within the Councils. The politicization of schools might as well bring in all the traditional political vices: clientelism and corporativism (Fonteles Sobrinho, 1997). Moreover, one thing has not deserved attention yet: the all-encompassing and empty meaning of school community as a magical entity that harmoniously integrates internal and external actors, teachers and parents, as if they only shared common interests. So far, participation in school governance has been more a conquest of teachers than of parents, and community participation, in its broad sense, remains as an appealing maxim.

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